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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: CIVIL SOCIETY MEETS WITH A/S GORDON

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F TEFFT FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Georgian academics, analysts and civil society leaders discussed domestic politics, the necessity of developing more robust civil institutions, and relations with Russia at a June 11 lunch with EUR Assistant Secretary Philip Gordon. While participants' opinions varied, in general they coalesced around frustration with the current deadlock surrounding the ongoing opposition-led protests and the belief that that the opposition does not know how to back down from its demand that Saakashvili resign. They said the current stalemate and domestic instability are significantly affecting the country's economy and institutions; if the situation continues, they worried that progress made in the past few years could be lost. One theme that ran throughout the conversation was the lack of trust among various elements of society, and between government and opposition. A/S Gordon reaffirmed U.S. support for Georgia, stressing that the U.S. desire for an improved relationship with Russia will not come at Georgia's expense. End summary.

LACK OF TRUST IN SOCIETY

¶2. (SBU) All participants lamented the public's lack of faith and trust in Georgia's democratic structures. This, they believed was due to the lack of development of government and civil institutions, especially the judiciary. While significant progress had been made in developing institutions separate from personalities or parties, the events of November 2007 almost instantaneously eroded trust. Several of the experts believed that while the government's credibility was significantly damaged in November 2007, the current protests have led to a similar phenomenon between the public and the non-parliamentary opposition. Therefore, the public is left neither with faith in their government, nor with a system of checks and balances. All participants agreed that the lack of trust among members of the government, between the government and the opposition, and between the population and all politicians placed a great strain on the democratic development of Georgia.

¶3. (C) Gia Nodia, a former Minister of Education and the Director of the Caucasus Studies School, described the current protests as part of an ongoing domestic political crisis. In his opinion, opposition supporters do not think they can win elections, not because of a lack of popular support, but because in their view recent elections have not been free and fair. The fact that many members of the non-parliamentary opposition were also part of the Rose Revolution is also contributing to the crisis; many of the participants believe there is a lack of fresh ideas about how to enact reform. Those who proclaim to be opposition keep reverting to the very model that brought in the Saakashvili regime. Nodia asserted that the opposition knows that Saakashvili will not resign, but that they hoped the government would crack down on protests as in November of 2007, creating popular support for their cause and bringing pressure to bear on Saakashvili. Nodia added that the

opposition is deadlocked. He said most of non-parliamentary opposition know this, but can not find a face-saving way to back away from their demand that Saakashvili resign. The experts gathered supported constitutional changes, changes in electoral laws, as well as possible early parliamentary elections depending on structural changes, but not presidential elections, as a way out of the crisis.

DAMAGE TO INSTITUTIONS
QDAMAGE TO INSTITUTIONS

14. (C) All agreed that the domestic political situation is damaging Georgia's economy and institutions, which were already weakened by the August 2008 conflict and global economic crisis. If a compromise is not reached between the government and opposition, they worried that much of the progress made since the Rose Revolution could be lost. A/S Gordon asked the group about the state of media freedom in Georgia. Participants expressed concern that outlets are neither free, fair, nor objective in their coverage. This, several, agreed is not simply a problem of government interference, but of overall development of the media and the commercial challenges media outlets face. They acknowledged that the Georgian media, regardless of political orientation also covered the activities and statements of the non-parliamentary opposition. Alexander Rondeli, President of the Georgia Foundation for International and Strategic Studies (GFSIS), said that unfortunately independent television stations such as Kavkasia and Maestro do not provide unbiased reporting, but instead opposition propaganda. The group even agreed that being considered balanced and accurate was not valued by present media outlets. Participants noted that while challenges remain in

TBILISI 00001140 002 OF 002

television media, print media is free and that most newspapers tend to be extremely anti-government.

RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA

15. (SBU) Participants were eager to learn about U.S. policy towards Russia, especially regarding its impact on the U.S.-Georgia relationship. Assistant Secretary Gordon reaffirmed U.S. support for Georgia, stating that his visit was intended as a way to show Georgians that a better U.S. relationship with Russia will not come at Georgia's expense. He stressed that the U.S. does not accept the Russian concept of a "sphere of influence," nor does the U.S. accept that countries in this region are not free to choose their own allies. He assured the group that President Obama will make this clear when he meets with President Medvedev, and that the Secretary will make this clear at the OSCE ministerial in Corfu. The Assistant Secretary's comments were well received by the attendees.

16. (SBU) Participants in the lunch included:

Gia Nodia, Director, Caucasus Studies School;
Alexander Rondeli, President, Georgia Foundation for International and Strategic Studies;
Ekaterina Siradze-Delauny, International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy;
Alexi Alexshishvili, Policy and Management Consulting Group;
Zurab Abashidze, Board Member, Georgia Council of Foreign Relations.

17. (U) A/S Gordon did not have opportunity to clear this cable before his departure.

TEFFT